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ABSTRACT

Many youth face the following educational and economic barriers to success: (1) increased high school dropout rates; (2) adolescent pregnancy; (3) chronic unemployment; (4) poverty; (5) drug abuse; (6) suicide; and (7) crime and delinquency. The Atlantic Community College (New Jersey) Youth Corps Program, a successful conservation and service corps program serving out-of-school youth between the ages of 16 and 25, illustrates the important link between earning and learning. The program is the newest of 15 New Jersey Youth Corps programs, developed by the State to combat unemployment and illiteracy. Participants are exposed to comprehensive educational and vocational experiences, including significant contact with caring and committed adults. Project components include the following: (1) Intake; (2) Orientation and Screening; (3) Breakaway Curriculum; (4) Community Service Projects; (5) Basic Skills; (6) Supportive Services; (7) Student Council and Alumni Association; and (8) Graduation and Achievement Awards Ceremony. Among other cited benefits to students and employers, participants who were tested after competing 100 hours of the program showed a general improvement in grade equivalency levels ranging from .01 to 2.0. A brief list of references is included. (FMW)

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THE LINK BETWEEN LEARNING AND EARNING: A Comprehensive Service Delivery Model Designed to Improve the Quality of Life of High School Dropouts and "At-Risk" Youth

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INTRODUCTION

> "There is a parallel between the situation of present day youth and the problem of the Depression era. The 1930's were a time of economic despair; the 1980's are a time of social despair. If you measure poverty in terms of despair and hopelessness, we have an underclass of young adults."
>
> Jim Kielsmeier
> President, National
> Youth Leadership Council

Many forecasters predicted that the 1980's would be a golden-age of opportunity for youth. Unfortunately, this has never come to fruition. The fact is, as Kielsmeier and others cited, we have an underclass of young adults. These youngsters are faced with economic or educational barriers which will hinder them from moving through adolescence into a productive adulthood. These barriers are as follows. (1) increased high school drop-out rates, (2) teenage pregnancy, (3) chronic unemployment, (4) poverty, (5) drug abuse, (6) suicide and (7) crime and delinquency.

Dropout Rates, Pregnancy, Unemployment and Poverty

Previous research has indicated that high school attrition is related to socio-economic background, achievement and attitudes, and individual behaviors. Youth most likely to drop-out come disproportionately from low socio-economic backgrounds.[1] Other background factors associated with drop-outs include coming from a single-parent family, coming from a large family and living in the South or in a large city.[2]

The U.S. is faced with over 700,000 students dropping out of

high school per year. According to the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), one out of every four (4) students drop-out before graduation. A common trend however, amongst all drop-outs is that they leave because they do not have much success in school and they do not like it. Males however, are more than twice as likely than females to report leaving school because (1) behavior problems (including not being able to get along with teachers), (2) being expelled or suspended and (3) because of economic-related issues.[3] Our females generally leave due to pregnancy and/or marriage.

Hodgkinson (1985) states that every day forty (40) teenage girls give birth to their third child. To be the third child of a child is to be very much "at risk" in terms of one's future.[4] These young ladies not only jeopardize their own health and welfare but also the quality of life of their children.

Teenage mothers tend to give birth to premature children. Prematurity leads to low birth weight, which increases these infants' chances of major health problems due to the lack of the child's immune system; low birth weight is a good predictor of major learning difficulties when the child gets to school.[5] This means that about 700,000 babies of the annual cohort of around 3.3 million births are almost assured of being either educationally retarded or "difficult to teach."[6]

Unfortunately, half of these young mothers never complete high school. Consequently, they are unable to adequately participate in the labor market. Those who may be able to work may be faced with low wages and have limited resources

for quality child care. Hence, they become more dependent on society. Teenage pregnancies cost us over 16 million dollars a year in welfare cost alone.[7]

In comparison to high school graduates, dropouts tend to have less earning power and suffer some loss of cognitive skills. In 1981, the unemployment rate for high school dropouts age 16 to 24 was nearly double the rate for high school graduates.[8] The average difference in lifetime earning between high school dropouts and high school graduates is $215,000.[9] This is a large sum of money and it becomes a great deal larger when it is summed over the total number of dropouts per year. Thus, the state and local governments are collecting 71 billion dollars less in taxes per year.[10]

It has long been recognized that high school graduates outperform dropouts on tests of cognitive performance. Recent evidence suggests that the gap between dropouts and graduates widens after youngsters drop out. With little prospect for success in the labor market, dropouts are more likely to become social liabilities if they do not re-enter school and/or an employment training program that prepares them for a high school diploma and the world of work. Everyone who enters the workforce is going to have to learn to do the same job seven or eight ways, or to do seven or eight different jobs in order to remain employable throughout their lifetime, therefore, the ability to learn[11] and think is critical. By

1990, an estimated three out of four jobs will require some education or technical training beyond high school.[12] Similar to the findings on dropout rates, unemployment rates and labor force participation strongly correlates with ones social economic status. Youth from poor and near-poor families and from many minority families continue to fare quite poorly in the labor market.[13] Twenty percent (20%) of our nation's teenagers are living in poverty and another twenty-eight (28%) are living in near poor families.[14] Poor black teens have by far the most severe employment problems with only 14% employed.[15] Those who are fortunate to be employed usually receive work for short periods of time and for lower wages.

Our nation's teenagers are the hardest hit in relationship to unemployment. While 16 to 19 year olds account for 6.7% of the labor force, they constituted 17.9% of the officially unemployed.[16] Unemployment for the next 10 years is expected to increase for youth between the ages of 16-24, even though the numbers of young people are on the decline. This will be due primarily to their (youth) lack of basic literacy, analytical, job-readiness skills and exposure to the legitimate job market. This failure to develop a work history severely limits their employment prospects for the future.

Drug Abuse, Suicide and Crime/Delinquency

The victims of drug abuse are getting younger all the time. The statistics are alarming; slightly more than 2.5 million youth between the ages of 12-17 are using marijuana on a monthly basis; more than six million from the same group use

alcohol each month.[17] Cocaine and crack are being peddled and used by youth from every social economic background. The abuse of other substances such as PCP, amphetamines, barbiturates, glue and cough syrups has declined, yet not to the point where we can afford to ignore it.

Youth who use drugs tend to contemplate and/or commit suicide at a higher rate than non-users. According to Phil Donahue (May 20, 1987), eighty (80%) percent of all kids who smoke marijuana contemplate suicide.

The number of teenage suicides has risen from 1,239 persons between the ages of 14-24 in 1960 to 5,239 in 1980. The suicide rates amongst teenage males are higher; they are 4:1. It is not that males have more suicidal tendencies, it's simply that males tend to have more access to lethal weapons.

In general, over 2 million young people under the age of 18 are arrested for offenses (20 percent of them are girls) ranging from murder to vagrancy, and including burglary, larceny, vandalism and arson and assault. Among the two million arrests of juveniles in 1980, 4 percent were for serious violent crimes.[18] Most violent juvenile crime is committed by males against other young males.[19]

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency reports that a substantial amount of juvenile crime is linked to drugs. The drug abusers who turned to crime usually did so for financial gain. These crimes however, almost never resulted in violence. Nevertheless, all crime must be taken seriously because even those victims who escape physical injuries often suffer

psychological harm for being victimized.[20]

PRECIOUS GEMS

Our youth are one of our most <u>precious</u> natural resources.
Educate them so that they may
   flourish and shine
Shine like the SUN
Glitter like GOLD
Be as radiant as a full-cut diamond
and blossom like a flower
Yes, indeed they are precious ...
   PRECIOUS GEMS
Why not treat them as such.

Cheryl D. Jackson
January 6, 1980

With these devastating facts, is there hope for our youth. Like it or not, they are one of our most precious resources that we have, simply waiting to be asked to blossom and grow. If we fail to preserve this resource, we are doomed for disaster. In essence, we are heading for personal stagnation. Large segments of our society will be uneducated, unprepared and unemployable, bringing about increases in welfare dependency, crime and unrest; decrease in tax revenues, competitiveness in world markets,[21] even our national security. Undoubtedly, there is no <u>one</u> solution to this complex issue. We do know however, as we move toward the twenty-first century that all levels of government, public and private educational institutions, labor unions and community based organizations can ill afford to operate in a vacuum or as a separate entity. It is critical that all segments of the society move forward together committed to making the best use of limited resources through collaboration and coordination of employment policies.[22] Each must feed and build on the strengths of each other. One such vehicle of accomplishing this collaborative effort is through supporting and promoting conservation and service corps programs.

YOUTH CONSERVATION AND SERVICE CORPS CONCEPT:
The Link Between Learning and Earning

"Clearly a more rational and comprehensive approach for preparing Americans for the labor market is essential, and the scope of public policy on employment must be expanded to include the entire work-force. It is imperative that all players in the economy-business, a spectrum of agencies at all levels of government, training and education institutions, labor, and community agencies--work together in partnership to meet the labor market challenges of the future."

William H. Kolberg
President, National
Alliance of Business

The idea of affording youth the opportunity to make a contribution to society is not a new concept. The first and most successful program was developed during the Great Depression Era by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Over three million young men served in the Civilian Conservation Corps. This program provided employment for young civilians and developed a disciplined work force for the nation. During the 1960's and 1970's this concept was replicated in several federal programs: The National Youth Administration, Peace Corps, Job Corps, Neighborhood Youth Corps, Youth Conservation Corps, and others. More recently, state, local, regional and non-profit agencies began to buy into this concept, particularly in areas where growing numbers of youth unemployment, illiteracy, deterioration of services, public facilities and public land occurred.
In 1985, the State of New Jersey embarked upon this endeavor to

stamp out unemployment and illiteracy.

As a result, fifteen (15) New Jersey Youth Corps programs have been established. The newest kid on the block is the Atlantic Community College Youth Corps program. This project serves the entire Atlantic County area.

ATLANTIC COMMUNITY COLLEGE - Youth Corps Model

This Youth Corps program is a comprehensive work study experience for out-of-school youth between the ages of 16 and 25. It is designed to illustrate the linkage between learning and earning. The youngsters are exposed to multifaceted educational and vocational experiences, coupled with caring and committed staff. All students are known in a personal way. We deal with the "whole" student. In other words, we deal with certain problems in their home, community and with peers. We promote student success in school and work. Staff use persuasive motivational strategies (e.g. tying school activities directly to the real world and building esprit de corps among the participants).[23] The classes are small and instructors tend to develop educational plans which are suited for each individual's learning skills.

At risk youth need social experiences with adults who exemplify characteristics of responsibility, the work ethic and the ability to build positive human relationships.[24] These characteristics are developed through our Community Service Projects component. The Community Service Projects serve as a catalyst for a variety of vocational possibilities which may lead to full-time employment. Additionally, it helps students to be both active and reflective.

Last but not least, this model provides supportive services and other auxiliary program activities. These are as follows: (1) scheduled counseling sessions, (2) job/training placement services, (3) information and referral and (4) Student Council and Alumni Association (5) Graduation and Achievement Awards Ceremony.

INTAKE -(Phase 1)

BASIC SKILLS TESTING AND PROGRAM POLICIES REGARDING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

This program seen as a fresh start, requires commitment from students. "They must commit themselves to a set of rules, work expectations and standards of behavior. Clear rules about attendance, the quantity and quality of work required, and the consequences for breaking rules are spelled out in detail. The model assumes that not everyone can or will make an explicit commitment to such rules. For those who cannot make the initial commitment, admission is denied. Those who persistently fail to keep their commitment are terminated from the program."

Gary Wehlage, Robert H. Rutter and Anne Turnbaugh

Each student is interviewed by an intake counselor. The student's attitude and aptitude is examined. Those students who have a sincere desire to further their education, are willing to work on a Community Service Project (for at least 20 hours per week), are willing to turn less desirable behaviors into positive ones, and have at least a sixth grade reading comprehension score are invited to attend our Orientation and Screening session.

Students are allowed a maximum of three (3) unexcused absences before being placed on in-house probation. In-house probation consists of ten (10) full days in the Basic Skills classroom, they are not afforded the opportunity to work during this period. Their attendance and social graces are closely monitored. If necessary, additional counseling is provided. In-house probation may be extended up to the forty (40) hours, if improvement has not been shown. Thereafter, he/she will be

suspended.

Attendance policies are explained both orally and in written form. Students are aware of this program policy during intake, orientation and screening, individual counseling sessions and periodically in the Basic Skills classes.

Students are tested prior to admission to the Youth Corps program. After 100 hours of basic skills training, students are retested. Three months into the program students take the Pre-GED test. Based on their Pre-GED scores, participants are scheduled for GED tests.

ORIENTATION AND SCREENING - (Phase 2)

Orientation and screening consists of a week of rapport building amongst staff and students. At the orientation sessions, students gain an understanding of the purpose and nature of the Youth Corps program. School policies and procedures are explicitly explained. Each student is asked to sign a contract stating that he/she understands the goals and objectives of the program, and are willing to accept the terms and conditions. At the end of the week, those students who are deemed as Youth Corps caliber are admitted into the Breakaway curriculum.

BREAKAWAY CURRICULUM - (Phase 3)

Breakaway is a holistic approach to addressing the employment/ career needs of youth. This curriculum is designed to help students identify who they are, what career path is best suited for them, and how to find and keep a job. It orientates students to the world of work and makes that transition from school to work much easier.

During these four weeks, the students are exposed to the following resources: Resume Writing and Interviewing Techniques, Career Inventory Tests, Career/School Library, Roundtable Discussions, Teambuilding Exercises, Guest Speakers and Field Trips. Each student's performance and attitude is measured and evaluated weekly at individual career counseling sessions. Upon completion of Breakaway, students are eligible to interview for paid community service projects.

COMMUNITY SERVICE PROJECTS COMPONENT - (Phase 4)

The purpose of the Community Service component is to teach youth self-esteem, "habits of work", community pride and appreciation. Positive attitudes, neatness, punctuality, task orientation, etc. are all necessary pre-requisites for success in any job or training program. Consequently, all youth corps members are required to work on Community Service projects. The youth are paid minimum wages with the possibility of receiving increments based on their monthly performance reports.

Example of the incremental steps are as follows:

Step 1 (Entry-level)	$3.35
Step 2 (Mid-level)	$3.50
Step 3 (Intermediate Level)	$3.75
Step 4 (Assistant Crew Leaders level)	$4.00
Step 5 (Crew Leaders Level)	$5.50

There are seven (7) types of Community Service projects. Youth Corps participants (YCPs) are assigned to one or more of the following areas: (1) Parks Rehabilitation and Recreation Development (2) Construction/Building Trades, (3) Weatherization (Low-Income Housing), (4) Education/Day Care,

(5) Health Care, (6) Geriatric Services, (7) Historic Preservation/Restoration.

Additionally, all YCPs must participate in at least one "Signature Project". A signature project is generally a highly-visible community event. Such an event may consist of but not limited to: (1) developing community gardens, (2) distributing government food to the elderly and "disadvantaged", (3) participating in annual fundraiser drives. Such group experiences teach cooperation, responsibility, the work ethic, and only incidentally introduce youth to possible careers.[25]

BASIC SKILLS COMPONENT (Phase 5)

One of the goals of the basic skills component is to prepare students to take the Tests of General Educational Development (G.E.D.). Instructors, therefore, develop educational plans based on each individual's strengths and weaknesses in the area of writing, reading, science, social studies and math. Individualization, clear objectives, prompt feedback can create evidence of progress, and an active role for students are some of the dominant features[26] of this model. Other important activities implicit in the model include: drug abuse prevention, sex education, parenting skills, health care and nutrition, consumer education, various social/civic projects, and computer literacy.

SUPPORTIVE SERVICES (Phase 6)

All YCPs are encouraged to utilize the resources of our supportive services component. Students are able to receive regularly scheduled counseling sessions, both career and personal

on a weekly basis. Walk-in counseling and emergency counseling is provided as deemed necessary. Group counseling sessions are held every six weeks. These sessions are facilitated by both of our counselors addressing such issues as:

(1) What are you going to do "here and now" in relationship to your career aspiration?

(2) How do you handle confrontation in school and in the workplace?

(3) How can you dispell myths about specific careers or community service projects?

(4) Other timely topics.

All sessions are mandatory and counseling records are maintained. An information and referral bank has been established in which YCPs can be referred for service outside of our program scope. Additionally, child care provisions are made for young mothers who are economically disadvantaged.

An exit interview is conducted on each YCP thirty days prior to completion of the program. During this interview, students are able to provide us with "candid" feedback about the program ... what they liked, disliked, program areas which they found to be beneficial, future recommendations and how we can assist them in their post-Youth Corps experiences.

For each YCP who successfully completes our program, an after-care/placement plan is developed. It is based on the following criteria: (1) career interest, (2) academic reports, (3) monthly work attitudes and performance records, and (4) available slots. A comprehensive job bank and information and referral system has been developed to assist YCPs in positive outcome placement. These placements may consist of a job, on-the-job

training program, an apprenticeship, the military or other post-secondary opportunities.

This Youth Corps program is fortunate to be able to tie into the numerous resources which we have on our college campus. Additionally, we have established rapport with local government agencies, community-based organizations, JTPA/PIC Councils, food and beverage unions. Consequently, we have collectively agreed to develop cross-referral procedures to maximize the coordination of services within our Service Delivery Area (SDA).

STUDENT COUNCIL AND ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

The Student Council and Alumni Association (SCAA) functions as an auxiliary branch of our program. It serves as a vehicle for providing student input into the overall service delivery model. Secondly, it affords the students the opportunity to participate in small business projects, various social and cultural activities.

Past and present students who are interested in serving on the SCAA is interviewed and voted upon at a regularly scheduled meeting. All interested parties, must be committed to educational excellence, supports the goals and objectives of the New Jersey Youth Corps, and must be willing to serve on at least one committee.

The SCAA has proven to be an added attraction to our program. Students have developed a sense of pride. They become more cognizant of the importance of team spirit. Thirdly, they became business-wise. Last but not least, they are able to see how their positive input into the system renders significant output.

GRADUATION AND ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS CEREMONY (Phase 7)

The Graduation and Achievement Awards Ceremony is the final phase of our program. This is the time when the New Jersey Youth Corps acknowledges the accomplishments and achievements of its participants. A formal gathering is held. Parents, friends and the general public is invited to celebrate in this culminating event.

> "This model for at-risk high school students is designed to achieve a broad set of goals that will promote the interests of both the individual and society. To accomplish these goals, the program must be attractive to youth and teachers alike and should promote a positive teacher and student culture. Within it, an inventive curriculum can provide students with knowledge, service and experiences, that simulate cognitive, personal, and social growth and lead to their success as adult citizens."
>
> Gary G. Wehlage, Robert A. Rutter, and Anne Turnbaugh

SUMMARY

Researchers (Dunn and Dunn) have found that when teachers expand their instruction to respond to student's individual learning styles, it takes as little as six weeks to see increased achievement and a decrease in discipline problems. Even at-risk youngsters begin to learn and feel better about themselves and teachers no longer regret having them in class.[27] We tend to support this theory. After six weeks into the program, staff

knows each one of the students on a personal level. The students themselves begin to become acclimated to the school environment. It is at this point where YCPs genuinely feel accepted or not. Additionally, we have found that YCPs who test at the 100 hours point (approximately around six weeks) generally show an improvement in grade equivalency levels ranging from .01 to 2.0.

Some other interesting facts are:

(1) Students who entered into our program with less than 6.6 reading levels tend to have behavioral and/or attendance problems more frequently than those whose reading levels were higher. We have also seen this problem occurring marginally amongst YCPs where reading levels were above the 10th grade.

(2) YCPs who scored 230 or above on the Pre-GED test had little or no problem succeeding in the actual GED test.

(3) Upon successful completion of the Employability Component of our program, students were better prepared for entree into the labor market. Work maturity skills were continuously nurtured throughout their duration in the program (both in school and at work). Students were evaluated on a monthly basis by their site supervisor in the following ten (10) skill areas:

(1) Quality of Work
(2) Work Quantity
(3) Following Directions
(4) Appearance
(5) Dependability
(6) Working Relationships
(7) Personal Behavior
(8) Attitude
(9) Attendance

(10) Punctuality

(4) Some of the YCPs who either had limited experience with the labor market and/or those who had families found it difficult to start working at the minimum wage level. Overall, they (students) found their Community Service Projects to be excellent stepping stones. In fact, several students were offered future employment upon completion of their GED.

(5) Site supervisors at the various Community Service Projects had commented that our students are willing and able to perform tasks on hand provided that they are given adequate instructions.

(6) They (site supervisors) found YCPs to be an asset to their organization. In essence, the YCPs served as an additional source of manpower. Consequently, many of their projects which were originally on a "wish list" were completed by virtue of our students being present.

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